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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000330

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CONGRESS CONSIDERING BANNING HINDU FUNDAMENTALIST BAJRANG DAL

REF: A) CHENNAI 326 B) NEW DELHI 2513

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A prominent Catholic voice in the Congress party came away from a recent meeting with Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Indian National Security Advisor MK Narayanan feeling that India will probably ban the militant Hindu group Bajrang Dal as a result of the violence in Orissa and Karnataka. He believes the government will also take unspecified actions against Pentecostal churches that have allegedly engaged in forcible conversions and the distribution of inflammatory anti-Hindu literature. The contact refused to blame Karnataka's ruling BJP for the violence in that state and described the central government's unpublicized efforts to protect Christians in Orissa. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) In a September 25 meeting, K.V. Thomas discussed Congress party thinking on the recent religious violence in Orissa and Karnataka. Thomas, currently a member of the Kerala state legislative assembly who previously served as a member of the Indian parliament, is a prominent Catholic voice in the Congress party. Thomas told post that he met with Congress party President Sonia Gandhi and Indian National Security Advisor MK Narayanan during the week of September 15 - September 19 to discuss events in Orissa and Karnataka.

Government to ban Bajrang Dal?

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¶3. (SBU) Thomas said that, based on his discussions with Gandhi and Narayanan, he believes the Indian government will probably ban the militant Hindu group Bajrang Dal, which admitted to attacking churches in and around Mangalore on September 14 (ref B). He said a Bajrang Dal ban could be based on the fact that the group is "terrorist" and "anti-national." But he added that Narayanan told him that "forced" conversions and anti-Hindu literature distributed by Pentecostal churches "are a big problem" that help fuel anti-Christian violence. Thomas said that the government will also have to take some sort of action against Pentecostal churches if it decides to ban Bajrang Dal. He acknowledged that it is not possible to enact an outright ban on the Pentecostal churches, but said the government will have to take some sort of action against them to curb their provocative activities.

Don't politicize by blaming BJP

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¶4. (SBU) Thomas resisted blaming the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the recent violence in Karnataka. Echoing what we heard from Mangalore Catholics (ref B), Thomas said that "forced" conversions and distribution of inflammatory literature by the new Pentecostal churches in India has harmed the Christian community's previously harmonious relations with the Hindu majority. When asked whether the BJP government bore any responsibility for anemic police response to the church attacks, as well as for the violent quelling of Catholic protests in Mangalore on September 15 (ref B), Thomas

said the police response was "understandable." "The police are 99% Hindu and their feelings were hurt" by the Pentecostals, he said. He said one should not "politicize the issue" by blaming BJP.

#### Under-the-radar efforts to protect Orissa Christians

15. (SBU) Thomas explained that with parliamentary elections close at hand Congress had to carefully measure its response to the outbreak of violence. Many of the government's efforts to protect Christians are done in a deliberately low-profile manner according to Thomas. For example, he said, the government quietly sent to Orissa Central Reserve Police Force (CPRF) units from areas with a substantial Christian population. Thomas said that these units have a larger proportion of Christians serving in them, which would help counterbalance Orissa's largely Hindu local police forces.

Situation under control, but expect continued problems

16. (SBU) Thomas told post that he believes the situations in Orissa and Karnataka are both largely under control. He told us that Sonia Gandhi and MK Narayanan asked him to help open a dialogue between Christians and Hindus, which he said he has already begun to do. Despite these efforts, he expects "low-level" problems to continue until after the upcoming Indian elections because of the atmosphere of heightened tension surrounding the elections.

Comment: Election year means cautious Congress; mainstream Indian society suspicious of Pentecostals

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17. (SBU) Comment: With an election around the corner, Congress is balancing the need to preserve law and order and protect minorities with its desire to avoid handing the BJP another opportunity to claim that Congress coddles minorities at the expense of the Hindu majority. Banning Bajrang Dal would signal that Congress is willing to risk losing votes from the Hindu right in hopes of consolidating minority Christian and Muslim votes. To ameliorate the impact on the Hindu vote, the party may pair its possible ban on Bajrang Dal with some sort of action against the Pentecostal churches. But there is something beyond politics at play in MK Narayanan and K.V. Thomas's easy acceptance of the argument that there is a moral equivalence between the thuggish Bajrang Dal and the followers of the New Life church. That an intelligence professional and a Catholic politician both feel this way shows mainstream society's deep-seated suspicions about the new Christian players -- especially the Pentecostal churches -- on the Indian scene. End comment.

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